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USCCB "All-In" on Immigration Reform

Michael Sean Winters | Apr. 23, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

My colleague Brian Roewe had a news account [1]yesterday afternoon of the conference call with the media led by Cardinal Timothy Dolan, President of the USCCB, Archbishop Jose Gomez, chair of the conference?s committee on migration, and Bishop John Wester, chair of the communications committee. The call addressed the USCCB?s support for comprehensive immigration reform in light of the introduction last week of a bipartisan proposal from the ?Gang of 8? in the U.S. Senate.

The first and most obvious impression the three bishops made was that the USCCB is going ?all in? on immigration reform this year. ?We relish this opportunity to speak again on an issue that is very close to the heart of the church and to the country that we're proud to call our earthly home, immigration reform,? Dolan said in his opening remarks. ?Perhaps more than any other religion in the United States we are a faith of immigrants. We've been a nation of immigrants but it's almost as if the Catholic Church is an icon of the immigrant makeup of the United States of America.? Whatever reservations they expressed about the proposed legislation, there was no talk of "deal breakers." They spoke of the Church's history, but there were no histrionics.

Dolan noted that in addition to the Church?s historical role in helping immigrants to assimilate, one of the reasons the Church is so vital to the discussion of immigration reform is because ?It's interesting to note - another thing I think that gives us a passion about this issue is that the Catholic Church is there at all places along the migration track. See, very often these people come from Catholic communities beyond and so we're with them even at home before they leave to come here.? Dolan continued, ?In transit the Catholic Church is there in our services to help people on the move. And then when they come here into receiving communities there we are again. As the late Ed Koch, the mayor of New York told me, he said the two women that have been most welcoming of the immigrant to New York have been the Statue of Liberty and the Catholic Church - mother church. And that's a compliment that I do not forget.?

Archbishop Gomez seconded Dolan?s praise of the senators for trying to move a bill now. He said the ?Gang of 8? proposal ?contains many of the elements the bishops are looking for on immigration bill. The job now is to improve it so that all can come out of the shadows and are able to pursue the American dream.? Gomez expressed the hope that the bill could be improved by lowering the current wait-time to become a citizen to ten years or less from the currently proposed 13-year wait, and that the proposal be broader and more inclusive, especially for those whose claims to residency and citizenship are based on family reunification claims. Gomez specifically urged that the ?sibling? category be restored and that there be no reduction in the number of visas for adult married children.

On the issue of family reunification, the Church will be making an important point, one that I hope conservative members of Congress will consider deeply when they talk about ?family values.? There are powerful economic interests arguing for more migrant farm workers, and for more highly skilled workers. But, who will stand up for the principle that family reunification must be a major objective of the legislation? Answer: The Church.

Bishop Wester made the point that an ?enforcement only? approach has failed. He noted that the government

has spent as much as $150 billion on enforcement and it has not worked because it is a ?stand alone? policy. All three bishops made the point that the bill must be comprehensive, that any piecemeal approach to the legislation would likely doom it both in terms of legislative enactment and, if enacted, in terms of effectiveness. Wester called attention to a recent survey that indicated 77% of all Catholics support comprehensive immigration reform with a pathway to citizenship. It is time, he said, ?To do it, to do it right and to do it now.?

In the Q&A that followed, Cardinal Dolan was especially forceful in pushing back against the attempts by some opponents of immigration reform to argue that the bombings in Boston last week demonstrated a need to go slowly. ?That's just illogical, for a number of reasons. First of all, just out of common sense, to label a whole group of people, mainly the vast population of hardworking, reliable, virtuous immigrants,? Dolan said. ?To label them and to demean them because of the vicious tragic action of two people is just ridiculous. That's illogical. That's unfair. That's unjust.? He went on to make the case that a properly improved immigration system would more likely make such incidents more difficult, not more common. Dolan, burnishing his historian?s training, noted that in the nineteenth century, Irish immigrants were similarly accused of being ?Molly Maguires? even though very few Irish immigrants belonged to the radical group.

Archbishop Gomez noted that the threats to religious liberty that have been so prominent among the USCCB?s concerns include certain anti-immigrant policies enacted at the state level. ?That is one element of the campaign, the Fortnight for Freedom, to point out the religious freedom aspects of serving immigrants and refugees,? Gomez said. ?We've seen in Arizona and other laws attempts to criminalize assistance at times to immigrants and refugees, which would impose on our pastoral mission.? We will see if this year?s Fortnight for Freedom focuses more on immigration issues as opposed to the nearly total focus on the HHS mandate that dominated last year?s Fortnight event.

The dominant impression of the event was that the bishops intend to forcefully address the issue and push for passage of comprehensive reform. All three spoke passionately of the way immigrants enrich the Church and the country. ?But it's really, I think, a tribute to our church and also to our country and to our people, that we receive people with open arms, that we're eager to learn about their traditions, their customs,? said Wester. ?I know that they've deeply enriched our church here in Salt Lake City and the dioceses of Salt Lake City. We're the better for it and we're stronger for it. And we're really living, I think, with them the American dream.?

The second impression I took from the event was that all three men are different in temperament but united on this issue. Cardinal Dolan is an artful media interviewee: He took the questions asked, and moved in the direction he wanted to go, firmly but nicely shutting down a question about border enforcement. And, no one is better than Cardinal Dolan at displaying a human touch on a challenging political issue. In Archbishop Gomez?s remarks, you could detect the pastor for whom none of these issues is abstract. The soft spoken archbishop may speak softly, but there is real passion in his voice. This was my first encounter with Bishop Wester, and his command of policy, as well his clear answers to complicated questions, was impressive. All three were at the top of their game in terms of communications skills, but you could also tell that they have been studying the issue for some time. The clarity of the answers was not the result of a single briefing. All in all, the three were impressive.

The issue for the whole body of bishops is whether or not they will put the same energy and emphasis behind the campaign for immigration reform that they have put into the effort to overturn the HHS contraception mandate. Yes, the bishops have had a campaign for several years now, information for parishes, information on the USCCB website, etc. Almost every diocese has someone on staff dealing with immigration issues and Hispanic ministry. But, last year, during the HHS fight, the Knights of Columbus dedicated page after page of their magazine to the HHS issue, there were letters from the bishops read in the pulpits, there were bulletin inserts every week. Will the bishops mount a similar campaign this summer to get Catholics to pressure lawmakers to support comprehensive reform? If the tenor of the comments from Dolan, Gomez and Wester

yesterday were any indication, the answer is yes, the bishops are going ?all in? on immigration reform.

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